

community profile

BY EUAN BEAR

He doesn't look a thing like "Bruno Gianelli," the campaign consultant on *The West Wing*. Tall, skinny, glasses, given to casual shirts and jeans, he wouldn't impress a chance passerby as a political hired gun. But that's what Marty Rouse is. He's also 40 years old, gay, and he and his partner of 12 years, Scott Sherman, are moving back to Vermont, with their adopted son Sasha.

If you read *Newsweek*, you know about Sasha, an orphan from Eastern Europe, neglected in the orphanage, diagnosed with "institutional autism," as a result somewhat behind American norms in his development. But perhaps the worst insult to Sasha was when a homophobic neighbor made a report of physical abuse against his two daddies. The complaint was not substantiated, but the process required Sasha to undergo hours of medical examinations and tests.

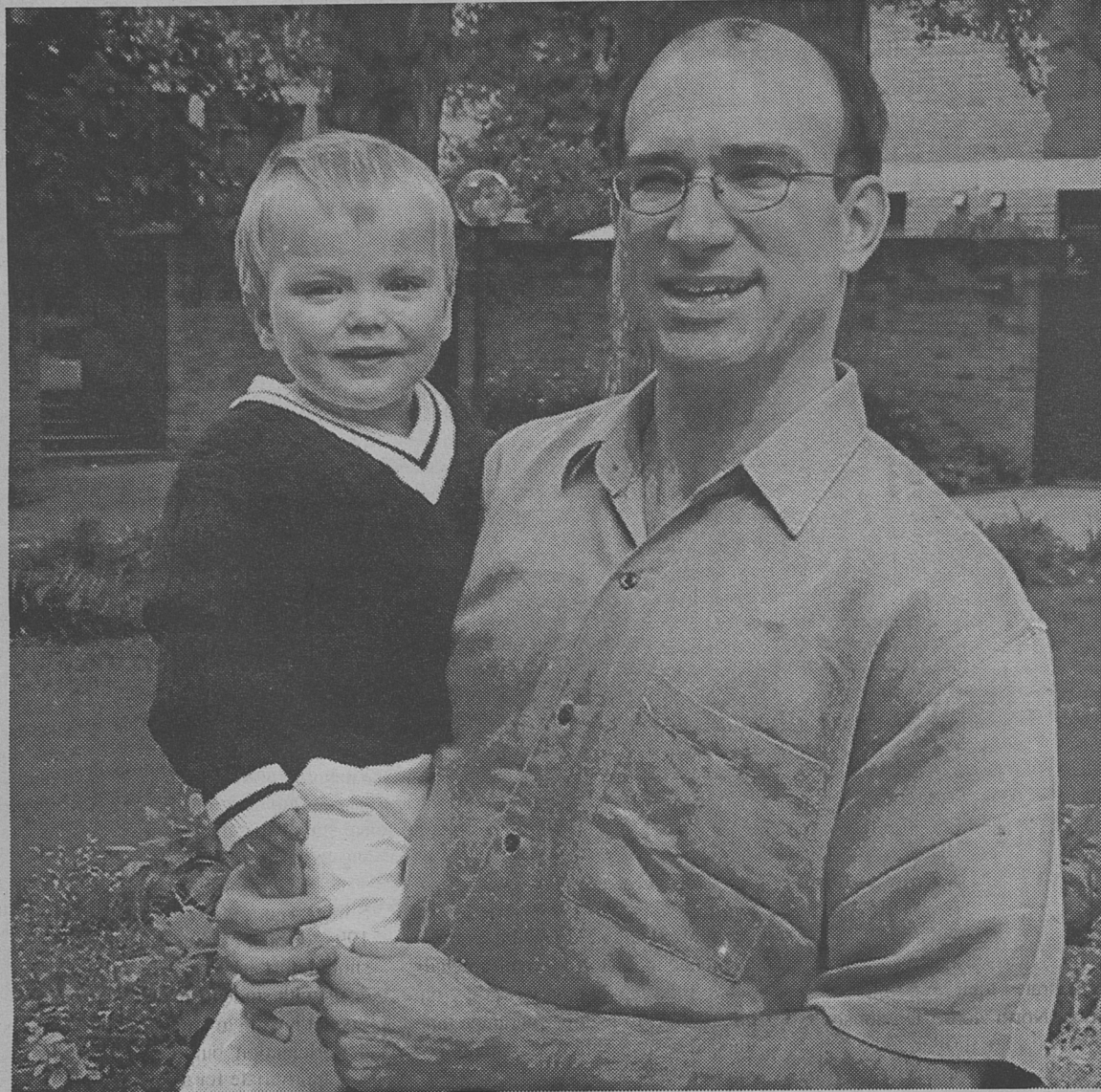
Now they're coming home, to live permanently in Vermont, where Marty is again for the fourth time — working for the Democrats on the party's Senate campaigns.

Marty Rouse is President of Catamount Consulting, a political consulting firm, currently based in Washington, DC. Among the firm's clients this year are the Human Rights Campaign, AIDS Action, the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (for whom he acts as "government liaison" in a Washington, DC satellite office) and the Vermont State Senate and House Democratic Campaign Committees.

He says he "just fell into" community organizing after he graduated from SUNY Stony Brook with a degree in German and a strong concentration in political science. "I like to swim upstream in all that I do. I wouldn't say I was drawn to the left; it's just where I am. I organized a boycott against Coors Beer in New York City." He also helped defend Planned Parenthood clinics and protested against the building of the Shoreham (Connecticut) nuclear power plant in the 70s. "It's not left, it's right. It's what was right in my mind; the right thing to do."

His childhood was spent in suburban Long Island, "Middle class all the way — middle-middle," he says. "I truly don't think there's any option but to fight for those who can't fight for themselves."

Marty has worked on labor, gay civil rights, HIV/AIDS, and political campaigns in New



Marty Rouse, Political Consultant, Helps Democrats Keep Seats

York, Vermont, and nationally.

He was a political appointee in the Clinton Administration, serving at both the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as an assistant to Secretary Donna E. Shalala and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development with Roberta Achtenberg, the Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity.

Marty Rouse first came to Vermont six years ago. "In early 1996, the White House asked me to run the Clinton/Gore reelection effort in VT. I was involved in the New York City and State campaign, but I was not a state director (I was the NYC Field Director and the New York State Lesbian/Gay and AIDS coordinator for campaign in '92). I accepted and fell in love with Vermont and its people. So, I've been planning to move up for a while, but wanted to remain in the Clinton Administration until the end. I loved my work in that Administration. The LGBT community — and all of America — is better for the 8 years of the Clinton Administration."

Peter Shumlin was the first elected official with whom

Marty developed a close relationship, he says. Shumlin "understood what was needed to win control of the Senate from the Republicans. It's hard to imagine now, but in 1996 the Republicans had a clear majority, 18-12 in the State Senate. Working closely with Shumlin — I was the director of the Vermont State Democratic Campaign — we developed a plan to take back the Senate. No one thought it was possible, but we won five [more] seats that year, changing the Senate to a 17-13 Democratic majority."

It was this majority, he suggests, that eventually was key in helping to pass civil unions legislation. "Had the Republicans been in the majority, it is doubtful that a civil unions bill would have ever made it out of committee," Marty adds.

During that 1996 election Marty developed many friendships with senators and others. When Shumlin asked for his campaign help two years later after passage of Act 60, he couldn't say no. "I didn't want to see my friends lose." The Democrats maintained a 17-13 majority in the Senate that November.

In 2000, "after civil

unions was passed," Marty relates, "Peter Shumlin and his wife Deb called me up and were frightened by the calls they were receiving from hostile Vermonters. They pleaded with me to come up and help one more time. In reality, they didn't need to plead at all — I felt it was my duty as a gay man who understood Vermont campaigns to help again. I came up for three months, living most of the time in Franklin County State Senator Sara Kittell's basement." Marty says that experience made him understand on a new level that "politicians are real people. They are public servants, but they also need to get their kids fed and off to school."

His mission this year is to increase the majority of Senate seats held by Democrats, and for him, it's not just about Vermont. "We now have a precarious one-vote margin between keeping civil unions the law of the land and a possible long, drawn out fight to protect our families. I see the national perspective as well here. If we can increase the Democratic majority in the State Senate this year, elected officials and lgbt organizers around the country will be more bold and

seek to establish similar legislation to protect our families. I see the Vermont State Senate elections as the most important elections in Vermont and indeed the entire country for our community."

Because Vermont is a small state, person-to-person contact is one of the most important of campaign strategies, Marty says. "The most effective strategies for campaigns in Vermont are the ones that enable the candidate to be seen as a whole person and not a politician who has positions on issues." Yet some may disagree, given that fact that campaigns focused on the issues of civil unions and Act 60 allowed the Republicans to rise to a sweeping majority in the Vermont House.

Even as a political hired gun, Marty doesn't always get candidates to take his advice. "Many of the candidates listen to my suggestions; some don't. Most who do end up enjoying their campaigns a lot more, even if they lose. But I think my track record is pretty good. But, if you don't have good candidates, they really can't win." He says he gets personally involved in the candidates' lives, and feels "they are very special people."

Asked what a typical day looks like for him, Marty says, "I'm very busy all day/night long, *always* on email and always on home/business/cell phone. In Vermont, I'm always in my car driving around meeting candidates at their homes, not having them meet me in Montpelier. I like to get to know them, their family, their home, etc. It helps me help them more, if I can get to really know how they live day-to-day."

The most rewarding thing for him about being a campaign consultant "is seeing candidates who really understand their role in helping and representing their entire community. I also enjoy watching them develop into good candidates. Being a good elected representative and being a good candidate are two entirely different things."

The hardest thing? "Knowing that you can't be all things for all people; there's too much work to be done."

When he's not shepherding candidates through a campaign, Marty runs marathons (best time: 3:42) and half marathons as a member of the Washington, DC chapter of Frontrunners, a gbt running group. He's run the Covered Bridges (Virginia) half-marathon twice, and marathons in Baltimore, Washington DC, and Burlington. ▼